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ABSTRACT

Composition teachers can build a resource unit featuring writers from the surrounding community at little or no expense. Teachers may be acquainted with colleagues who have published, and newspapers, libraries, and even the telephone book may provide resources from which a writers directory can be compiled. Once a writer has been contacted, the instructor should discuss the scheduling details, stipend if any, and the possibility of videotaping the author. Prior to the classroom appearance, the author may want to submit a brief autobiographical sketch. Samples of the writer's work may be read during the appearance, and the author can describe his or her writing habits, attitudes, and changes in writing style over the years. Having the class write advance questions to ask can stimulate thought, as well as ensure attention during the appearance. Question-answer time should also be allowed at the end of the session. Because such a unit may be used by teachers in other content areas, the authors directory should contain appropriate information, and the directory should be made available at a central location. The videotapes will also make the author's appearance available to other teachers. The author's visit should be publicized through media releases, displays, and word of mouth; each successful appearance will set the stage for future appearances. (HTH)

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THE NEW ENGLAND STUDIES INSTITUTE

A TEACHING MODEL: BRINGING
LOCAL WRITERS INTO THE
CLASSROOM

Polly Chase Cleary

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A TEACHING MODEL: BRINGING LOCAL WRITERS INTO THE CLASSROOM

Using a model devised under the joint auspices of Dartmouth College and the National Endowment for the Humanities during the summer of 1982, teachers may explore techniques of building a resource unit of writers in their own teaching communities without it costing money.

The teaching model includes how to:

- locate writers
- prepare writers in advance of classroom appearances
- prepare classes
- make writers' appearances available to others in the school system
- publicize writers' appearances
- schedule flexibly
- arrange for a variety of writers
- construct the unit to last and to grow.

A TEACHING MODEL: BRINGING LOCAL WRITERS INTO THE CLASSROOM

I. How to Locate Writers

What began as an excursion into the unknown--or, at least, the very little known--has turned out to be a fine trip, indeed. In fact, for the authors who have become involved in this series, as well as for the students and staff members who have chosen to become involved, the experience has been enlightening in several ways.

The authors, many of whom have lived or worked in Chelmsford for years, were largely unaware of each others' existence. Students have profited from seeing live authors whom they may later see or know in various other contexts of community life. Furthermore, students have had the opportunity to question and learn about a variety of writing backgrounds and habits. Teachers, some of them authors themselves, have become acquainted with each of their writing colleagues in a helpful, practical and cooperative--rather than competitive--pursuit.

Although, as a writer myself, I have collaborated with some writers in this project and served as mentor to two, the exciting part of doing this unit was finding undiscovered others while delving into the pulse of creativity at Chelmsford.

What suggestions can be made for a "cold approach"? The most obvious is the local newspaper. Newspapers not only provide their share of home-grown writers; they also feature articles about writers from time to time. The librarian in the town can provide information regarding such local resources as writers clubs, local industries that may employ technical writers, and literary clubs, the members of which

may know local authors. One of the best resources may be school: personnel and students. Talk with students for suggestions. Ask staff members whether they have published, or if they know anyone in town who has published. Try to get names and addresses and telephone numbers.

On the other hand, if all attempts fail, plan to expand your parameters. Instead of developing a local town unit, create an area unit, including several surrounding towns or cities. If that provides too sparse results, expand your horizons again, and include graphic artists and, perhaps, musicians.

Originally, my plan consisted of Lowell/Chelmsford writers and artists of the twentieth century. Like the New England landscape, the unit grew in its own unique direction. And, like the town of Chelmsford itself, the project grew to be something that could not have been predicted at the beginning.

Finally, recognize that the research part of the project is merely the starting point. The telephone book will be helpful in forming a list of authors and their addresses. Keep a directory of authors. (How to prepare authors for an appearance is treated elsewhere in this presentation.) When you make the telephone call or write the initial letter of introduction, there is nothing that can substitute for your genuine self. Familiarity with the author's work, of course, is helpful, but not altogether necessary. Some authors will need encouragement; others will need your clear statement that you are not being funded; still others will want to meet you before the scheduled

appearance. You may be fortunate enough, however, to have funds available for speakers. If so, be clear about how much you can pay, how it will be paid, and when. Without funds, you may find other ways of paying the writer. In Chelmsford we videotape each author to preclude repeated "live" appearances. We also give advance newspaper publicity and create an in-school display, featuring biographical information, samples of the work, and information about the Chelmsford Writers Series. Additionally, we try to get cable television coverage, with advance notice to the community so that residents can see what is going on in the schools. Authors like that because it helps advertise their books.

II. How to Prepare Writers for Classroom Appearances

Talk to the writer beforehand. Inform the author of the exact time and place of the scheduled appearance. Find out whether any special equipment is required. Inform the author where the host teacher will meet him/her and when.

About a week before the scheduled appearance, mail the author some guidelines for classroom appearance, as well as a suggested time frame. (Samples of both are attached.)

Find out whether the author has previously been videotaped if you plan to use this technique of recording the appearance. If the author is nervous about appearing in front of a camera, you can sometimes provide reassurance by suggesting that videotaping is actually less risky than a live performance because of the editing process, which can erase errors.

Call the author the night before a scheduled appearance to make certain that he/she recalls the commitment, and leave your school phone number in the event that the appearance must be cancelled or deferred.

II. How to Prepare for Classroom Appearances

A. Writers' Guidelines for Classroom Appearance

If possible, submit a brief autobiographical sketch. Include education, publications, awards and any information that you consider pertinent to the work you do. Submit this before your appearance.

During your appearance, read some samples of your work. Tell when you began to write, and why. Tell why you write the kind of material you write, and whether you think your writing has changed in any way(s) over the years. Explain how you published your first work. Explain how you get your ideas for writing. Describe your writing habits. (Do you type your first copy; do you date and save copies; does a colleague critique your work? are sample questions to answer.) Indicate your years of connection with Chelmsford (but omit your current address). If you have a job, indicate what your job necessitates in the area of writing. What schools, if any, would you recommend for preparing a writer to do the kind(s) of writing that you do now, or have done in the past? If you have another job to support yourself while you work as a writer, please indicate what it is if there is any connection between it and writing. Tell where and when you began to publish. Bring samples of your books, pamphlets, magazine articles, etc. that the students may peruse.

As a general guideline for many different kinds of writers who will be involved in this series, this may help make you feel better prepared and more comfortable as you appear before students and a

television camera. However, ignore any areas or questions that you feel are irrelevant, or ones that make you feel uncomfortable. In addition, the particular filmstrip, radio play, videotaped production or other specific materials that some of you may wish to play will make it necessary for you to ignore large sections of the guidelines.

II. How to Prepare Writers for Classroom Appearances

B. Sample Letter to Authors

Dear _____:

To improve Chelmsford's education by bringing authors of Chelmsford into the classroom, we invite you to share with us your story. Enclosed are specific guidelines for your appearance. I shall telephone you to set a specific date and time.

You are a writer. Too often, during my years at teaching English--particularly writing--students have asked; When do we get to study somebody who's alive? The series being developed intends to answer that very question for students in our schools. Beyond that, it purports to answer that question with wide coverage for the authors who are so good as to share with us an hour of their time. Videotapes of your appearance will be made, edited and made available to other classes. In addition, with the advent of cable color television facilities at the school and in the town, your appearance can be viewed live by the parents in the community.

There are no funds available to pay speakers.

To date, the writers who will be invited to participate in this series span a vast spectrum, from poets to mystery writers; from technical writers of computer software to playwrights; from rock reviewers to children's magazine articles. We do wish that you can join us in the classroom.

Sincerest thanks, in advance, for your time and interest in supporting education in Chelmsford.

II. How to Prepare for Classroom Appearances

C. Suggestions for Using Class Time

A class session is _____ minutes long. Begin and end promptly.

In preparing your presentation rehearse it, keeping to the time limits.

A suggestion for organizing your presentation for a class period follows:

3-5 minutes: biographical information. (If you wish to have a student or a teacher introduce you, please mail biographical information a week before your appearance.

15 minutes: exposition about your writing interests, habits, and other topics mentioned in the enclosed Guidelines.

15 minutes: reading, conducting an activity, or playing your work.

3-5 minutes: questions from students.

III. How to Prepare Classes

Telling teachers how to prepare their classes in advance of a writer's appearance seems presumptuous. Teachers have been trained in preparing classes for various kinds of units.

Perhaps that can be a starting point for all of us. As you are introducing a unit in literature or in writing, if you are aware of possibilities for incorporating an author or several authors from your locale into it, the first step in preparing the class may be to mention that someone in town writes, "this sort of non-fiction," or "this kind of short story," or whatever it is that you're introducing. Usually, human nature being what it is, someone from the class will ask the big question, "Can we have him/her in?" --or something else will give you an opening to pursue an invitation to the author in question.

Your best preparation for the big question is having a directory of authors at hand so that you can mention selected names appropriate to the unit.

Sometimes it is better to wait until later in a unit before you suggest an autho. visit. When the remark that all the stories read are written by dead people is dropped like the proverbial albatross across your staggering body, a good comeback is to say, "What would you say to seeing a few live authors?"

Because this unit may be used by teachers in science, history, math and disciplines other than English, attempt t o select appropriate information about each author and include it in your directory of authors.

Copies of the directory should be made available at a central location at each school in the town where you teach.

Getting biographical information about a specific author before the appearance is important for you, as well as for your class. You should also try to read something that the author has written so that you can give the class an idea of what to expect before the author arrives.

Having the class write questions to ask can be a stimulus to thought, as well as a way of insuring attention during the appearance. Some time should be allowed (and the students should be informed of this beforehand) for a question-answer period during the session with the author.

Once your class understands the purpose of the writer's visit, prepares some questions to ask, becomes acquainted with the writer's background, and knows when the visit is scheduled, you can feel confident that your class is prepared.

IV. How to Make Writers' Appearances Available to Teachers

Too often we English teachers like to write. So we write. And write. And write. With that in mind, this will be brief.

First, videotape, if possible.

Second, tape record if no videotaping is possible.

Third, invite other teachers and their classes to share the live performance.

Fourth, instead of flooding your own classes with guest speakers, arrange for other staff members to entertain guest writers when the area of writing seems appropriate.

Fifth, create and make available a directory of authors that can be used as a source for all staff in all schools in the system.

For yourself, keep a list of author names and addresses and telephone numbers so that you can serve as a contact person. Keep in mind that authors may not want their addresses and/or telephone numbers publicized even though they have made that information available to you.

V. How to Publicize Writers' Appearances

Prepare a written summary. Send copies to local newspapers. If possible, before the appearance, call newspapers for photographic coverage.

Create a display case in the school where the author will appear. This provides an excellent opportunity for students to become involved in preparation for the visit. A few students may well volunteer to set up the display case, including biographical information, samples of the writer's work, and information about the writers' series.

Display case may mean a bulletin board, a library display or a glassed-in bookcase area in some schools.

Notify the school newspaper in advance so that school coverage will be possible.

Include the videotape title and number of the tape in the directory of authors as soon as a tape has been made. Other staff members will know where to find the videotape or whether an author has yet made an appearance.

If your school has an In-Service Program, volunteer to present a session on your writers series. If a newsletter accompanies your In-Service Program, be sure to insert information about your series in the newsletter.

Word-of-mouth may be the most effective way to transmit information about authors' appearances if your school is small. Your enthusiasm can be the best sign to others that your endeavors are worthwhile--and worth trying.

VI. How to Schedule Flexibly

Keep a calendar exclusively for the purpose of scheduling authors' appearances. Record the date you made the arrangements, the time of the planned appearance, the equipment required, and the author's telephone number. If you borrow a sample of the author's work, record exactly when you borrowed it and how you will get it back to the author.

Before calling the author, decide whether you are going to invite him/her into your class (and, if so, when) or whether you are going to invite him/her into someone else's class. Have a teaching schedule master list at your elbow, as well as written notes about what teacher, when, and any special circumstances that you need to convey to the author.

Confirm arrangements with the teacher and the author, sending copies of the notes you made during your telephone conversation. Include your name and address and phone number on all correspondence with authors.

Before the author appears, provide information regarding his/her in-school appearance to administrators and other staff members, and tell the author where to meet the host teacher, whether there will be time for an informal visit with other staff members, and whether you will be free to spend any time with the writer.

VII. How to Arrange for a Variety of Writers

Luck and effort. Patience, too. And, often, restraint.

In creating your series, if you expanded your parameters when you found your town authors too sparse, then (with luck) you may have been able to find a variety of writers.

However, if that, too, failed to provide variety, have patience. The exciting aspect of a unit such as this is: it never ends. Authors will be moving into town, getting jobs on the local newspaper, writing poetry, teaching in your schools, or working at jobs that demand some technical writing.

Restraint may be necessary if you live in a community wherein writers abound. If you have located more than you can at first contend with, you may have to limit that number by a variety of selective criteria. For instance, being published by a major publisher; writing a book, a full-length play, or a filmscript; living presently within the town; having graduated from the school system; having achieved writing awards; earning a living by writing or having published more than an arbitrary number of times are examples.

VIII. How to Construct This as a Lasting, Growing Unit

Creating a directory of authors is your first step toward making this project one that will grow and last. As more authors are incorporated into the unit, your directory entries will reflect the growth and change.

Moreover, each successful appearance will set the stage for future appearances. Remember that you are acquainting author with author, in some instances; that favor will often be repaid by authors whom you haven't located being told to contact you!

Through a sign-out system, keep a written record of what teachers, what classes have been exposed to an author's videotape or recorded appearance. As overuse becomes apparent, either remove the material from circulation or warn staff members that the material is being overused. Inevitably, some authors will be favored while others are ignored.

Update holdings periodically. This will remind staff that the series is growing and changing.

Create a reference book about all authors, including samples of their work or summaries of their work. Make the reference book available to each school in your system. Update it, as well as the directory.